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Opening extract from

The Fabulous Phartlehorn Affair

Written by

M L Peel

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"...ed elli avea del cul
fatto trombetta."
("...and he used his bottom
as a trumpet.")

Dante's *Divine Comedy*

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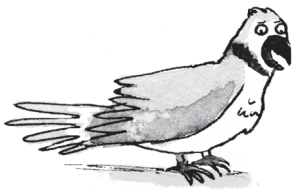
1
A Windy Morning

A cold wind rattled through the streets of London. It ruffled the feathers of pigeons and whipped against the faces of all the busy people rushing off to work. Litter scuttled along the pavements and the trees tossed their branches, whispering and creaking as they swayed from side to side. Meanwhile, down in the tiny bedroom of a houseboat moored on Camden Lock, a very different kind of wind was blowing. Bruno Pockley woke up with a start and smelt trouble.

Sure enough, before Bruno could reach out and slam the cabin door, his grandfather's parrot swooped into the room.



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"Pop goes the stinker! Pop goes the stinker!" squawked Chippy, landing on a shelf above Bruno's bunk.

A second later, Grandpa Trevor came clattering down from the deck to see what all the fuss was about. Bruno watched as his grandfather's muddy boots descended through the trap door, swiftly followed by his skinny chicken legs and enormous pot belly. Grandpa Trevor was a short man, and yet once inside the boat, even he had to stoop to avoid bashing his bald head against the ceiling. Not that Grandpa Trevor would ever admit to being bald of course. He was immensely proud of the three silver hairs he kept slicked across his forehead.



"Chippy!" the old man scolded. "Leave the poor boy alone. Bit of morning wind's just nature's alarm clock. Isn't that right, Bruno, love?"

Chippy flapped her blue and yellow wings. She shrieked and squawked and screeched. Then she made the briiinnng! of an

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alarm clock, followed by a loud squelching sound. Grandpa Trevor couldn't help but laugh. And when he did, his belly wobbled like a heap of frogspawn. Now he clutched at his stomach as if worried it might fall off.

Bruno slid back under his duvet and groaned. His curly brown hair stuck up from beneath the covers like a dirty mop. When would Grandpa Trevor understand that his unusual musical talent was not a laughing matter, but a very serious business? "Prodigious", that was how his parents had described it when they were around. *Prodigious*. Bruno liked the sound of that word. He didn't know exactly what it meant, but it had a very important ring to it.

Little did Bruno realize that very soon his prodigious parps would get him into more trouble than he could possibly imagine. For before the week was out, Bruno's extraordinary explosions would send shockwaves across Europe, spark an international manhunt and bring down the monarchy of an ancient Alpine kingdom.

But all that was in the future. Blissfully unaware of the dangers that lay ahead, Bruno Pockley rolled out of bed and padded off to brush his teeth.

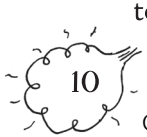
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2
The Boy with an Extraordinary Gift

The bathroom was cold and dank. A single porthole looked out across the muddy brown canal. Mould grew on the pipes behind the toilet, and icicles hung down from the shower, dripping freezing water onto the floor. And yet the damp and, if truth be told, really rather smelly bathroom was still Bruno's favourite place aboard *The Jolly Codger*. For it was only here that he could practise his parping in peace.

It didn't matter how much Chippy squawked or Grandpa Trevor laughed. Bruno knew he was a boy with a very special gift. Other people had to wait to be surprised by a trump. Bruno Pockley was able



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to produce them at will. He didn't need to stuff himself full of onions or garlic, cabbage or baked beans. Oh no, all Bruno had to do was to bend forward and suck in his stomach muscles until he felt a stream of cold air rush up into his tummy. Then, breathing out hard through his nose, he relaxed everything and gave a sudden shrug of his shoulders. BOOM! The air came hurtling out again like water from a whale's spout. And not only had Bruno taught himself how to trumpet on demand, he had also begun to learn how to control the pitch, length and volume of his parps. He experimented now with a three-note scale…

"Doh, ray, me," squawked Chippy from outside the bathroom. Grandpa Trevor tapped on the door.

"Come on, son, time to get dressed. Can't have you missing the school trip. It's all right for some, eh, Chippy? Lucky Bruno's off to spend a week at the seaside."



"Thar she blows!" screeched Chippy. "Thar she blows!"

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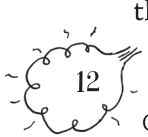
Peels of Grandpa Trevor's laughter reverberated around the boat. Inside the bathroom, Bruno's heart sank. He'd been trying not to think about the dreaded school trip to France.

The only thing that Bruno hated more than being mocked by a parrot was his new school. Or, to be precise, his fellow schoolmates. The worst thing about St Ermingarda's School for Exemplary Young People was definitely the other pupils. Selfish and spoilt, the lot of them. And now, thanks to the dreaded school trip, Bruno was about to spend a whole week in their company!

The second worst thing about St Ermingarda's was the uniform. In Bruno's opinion, forcing children to wear shorts every day was clearly an act of child abuse, and should be illegal. It wasn't so much the cold Bruno objected to. It was how stupid he felt trudging off to school each morning in his grey shorts, purple blazer, long red socks and straw hat with matching red ribbon.

"You don't look stupid. You look smart." That's what Grandpa Trevor always said, proudly patting his beloved grandson on the back.

Fat chance of that, thought Bruno, as back in the bedroom he reluctantly changed out of his



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pyjamas. Smart was not a look he could ever seem to pull off. Maybe it was his lopsided grin or his slightly sticky-out ears. Or perhaps it was because one of his eyebrows was just a bit bushier than the other. Whatever it was, there was simply something untidy about Bruno Pockley's face. And no school uniform in the world could disguise it.

Tugging his tie into a tangled knot, Bruno opened the bedroom door and made his way into the smoke-filled kitchen. Grandpa Trevor was bending over the stove, frying up a pack of bacon.

"My, my, if it isn't little lord smarty-pants!" he exclaimed, cracking an egg into the sizzling pan. "Or should I say little lord *farty*-pants, eh, Chippy?"

The old man hooted with laughter at his own joke. He slapped his thighs. He wheezed and giggled and sniggered and snorted. Soon Grandpa Trevor was laughing so hard he had dislodged his comb-over. Bruno decided not to tell his grandpa that his three precious hairs were now dangling down from his head like a one-sided beard. Let him be the butt of the joke for once.

Still chuckling to himself, Grandpa Trevor dished up breakfast. As always, Chippy joined them at the rickety wooden table, perching on

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the back of a chair while she gobbled down a plate of tinned pineapple chunks.

"Right," said Grandpa Trevor, shovelling in a last mouthful of toast and rising to his feet, "time to get this show on the road."

Like an ancient rock star signalling for his band to start up, the old man clicked his fingers and Chippy swooped onto his shoulder. Curious, she pecked at the dangling curtain of hair.

"Please, Grandpa," said Bruno, "does the parrot really have to come out with us? It's *soooo* embarrassing."

"Embarrassing?" exclaimed Grandpa Trevor. "Tosh! Who cares what other people think? I can't leave Chippy here. Think how lonely she'd be. Now off you go and put your shoes on. We'll be up in a second with your suitcase."



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3
The Worst Day of Bruno Pockley's Life

Perhaps I should pause now to explain how an ordinary boy like Bruno ended up at an exclusive establishment such as St Ermingarda's School for Exemplary Young People.

To be honest with you, it's a very sad story. Sensitive readers should probably skip ahead to the next chapter.

Still with us? OK, so here's what happened.

For the first nine years of his life, Bruno did not live aboard a houseboat moored at Camden Lock with Chippy and Grandpa Trevor. No, he lived with his parents, Ronald and Jane Pockley, in a basement flat just around the corner. In general

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they were a very happy family, but sometimes Bruno's mother would get sad. She was the kind of romantic woman who would have liked to sit each night and watch the sunset from her balcony. Unfortunately the basement flat did not have a balcony. In fact it only had one window. To make matters worse, this window was at the back of a kitchen cupboard. There were bars across it to keep the burglars out.

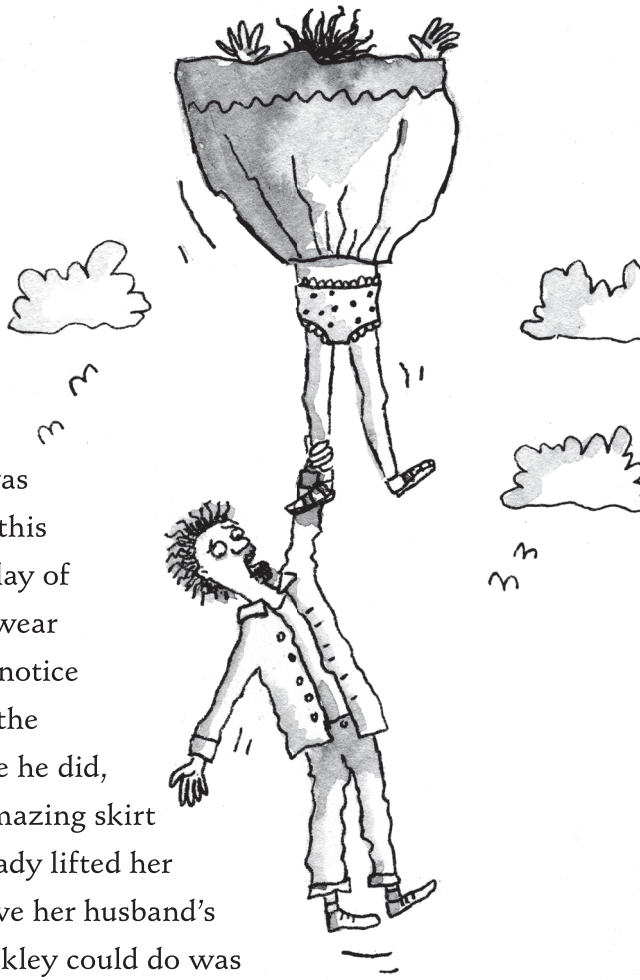
"It's them who should be in prison, not us," said Mrs Pockley with a sigh.

Who'd want to steal muesli anyway? thought Bruno.

On summer evenings, Mr and Mrs Pockley would sneak up onto the roof of the flats to watch the sunset. Going out on the roof was strictly forbidden to children. So while Mr and Mrs Pockley were upstairs enjoying the view, Grandpa Trevor would come round to watch telly with Bruno.

One warm night in August, a year before our story starts, the grey clouds were just turning to candy-floss pink when a freak gust of wind caught the edge of Mrs Pockley's dress. She let out a loud squeal as her skirt billowed over her head like a huge cotton balloon.

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Mr Pockley was so distracted by this unexpected display of his wife's underwear that he failed to notice her feet had left the floor. By the time he did, Mrs Pockley's amazing skirt balloon had already lifted her half a metre above her husband's head. All Mr Pockley could do was to jump up and catch hold of her feet. Soon the two of them were floating, up, up and away towards the horizon.

Downstairs in the flat, Bruno heard the shrieks of startled passers-by. He and Grandpa Trevor rushed outside. A small crowd had gathered on the pavement. Everyone was craning their neck

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towards the sky. Bruno peered up in the direction of their pointing fingers. Could that be his parents floating far above his head? It was! He was sure it was.

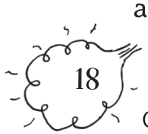
Helpless, he watched as the silhouette of his parents got smaller and smaller. Soon they were just a tiny black speck against the sun.

Ten minutes later, the owner of the flats, Maximillian King, screeched up in a yellow Porsche. He was a high-flying businessman whose business it was to buy up the tall buildings in the city. You could tell just by the look of him that his life had been lived inside offices. His hair was as grey as a filing cabinet. His skin was as white as photocopyier paper.

"All blame lies with the deceased," announced Maximillian King as he came towards Bruno with a legal-looking document. "Now if the dependant will just sign here…"

Bruno was in such a state of shock, that without thinking he began to sign.

"Hang on a minute!" cried Grandpa Trevor. He snatched the pen from his grandson's hand. "We know our rights, and we're not signing anything!"



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Maximillian King looked shocked. He was not used to being disobeyed.

"Very well," he hissed. "If that's the way you want to play it, I shall call my lawyer."

"For goodness' sake," shouted Grandpa Trevor, "the boy's parents have just floated off into the sky! He's not after money. What he needs right now is a hug."

This statement triggered a most peculiar reaction in Maximillian King. Despite being one of the world's richest men, the businessman had not been cuddled in more than twenty years. Much to everyone's surprise, he stepped forward and threw his arms around Bruno. His bottom lip began to quiver, and soon he was wailing like an orphaned kitten.

"Oh, my poor, poor boy. You're all lost and lonely like me," he whimpered. "Don't worry, Uncle Max will give you anything you want."

Bruno pushed him away in disgust. "All I want is my parents back," he said quietly.

Grandpa Trevor put his arm around his grandson and led him back inside.

An hour later a courier arrived with a letter. Grandpa Trevor read it aloud to Bruno.



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Dear Mr Pockley,

Whilst I admit no responsibility in relation to the case of the unlawful levitation of your son and daughter-in-law, I would like to make a contribution to the education of the dependant. I have therefore taken the liberty of enrolling Bruno Pockley at my old Alma Mater, St Ermingarda's School for Exemplary Young People, and will cover all associated expenses.

Yours sincerely,

Maximillian King

"What does that gobbledegook mean?" asked Bruno.

"It means that you're going to a new school," explained Grandpa Trevor. "And Mr King's paying."

"But I like the school I'm at now," protested Bruno. "All my friends are there."

"The offer of an expensive education is too good to refuse," said his grandfather. "I've made up my mind. If you're going to come and live with me and Chippy on board *The Jolly Codger*, I'm not having you tread water at some second-rate school. Besides, it's what your parents would have wanted."

There was nothing Bruno could say to argue with that.



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And that is the sad story of how an ordinary boy like Bruno ended up at St Ermingarda's School for Exemplary Young People. Where Mr and Mrs Pockley eventually came to land remained a mystery, but at least Bruno could console himself with the thought that his mother had finally achieved her dream of sailing off into the sunset with his father.



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Nobody Important

On the day our story begins, Bruno had been at St Ermingarda's for just under a year. Every morning, whether the sky was dark with clouds or decked with sunshine, the somewhat reduced Pockley family would set off down the towpath and on through the vast green expanse of Regent's Park. What a peculiar sight they made: the old man with the parrot perched on his shoulder; the young boy traipsing along beside him in that old-fashioned school uniform. Bruno hated the way people would turn their heads to stare, barely able to hide their sniggers.

Today, the grass was still bubble-wrapped with last night's rain. Bruno's compulsory brown leather sandals squelched on the wet turf. Mud spattered



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the backs of his bare legs and his red wool socks felt soggy between his toes. If only he was still at his old school, where you were allowed to wear trainers.

"Come along, love," said Grandpa Trevor, turning to wait for his grandson to catch up. "No shilly-shallying. We'll never get there at this rate."

Walking at a brisker pace, it took them less than fifteen minutes to reach St Ermingarda's towering iron gates. As always, a pack of photographers crowded the pavement outside the school. No sooner had the photographers glimpsed Bruno's purple blazer than their camera bulbs began to flash. Chippy gave a squawk of indignation. Grandpa Trevor shielded his eyes from the lights.

"Hold it! Hold it!" shouted a photographer as they drew nearer. "Don't waste your batteries. It's nobody important, just that scruffy little kid from the boat."

As abruptly as it had begun, the flashing and clicking of camera bulbs stopped. *Nobody important.* The words rang in Bruno's ears as a security guard ushered them in through the gates.

"No one important?" scoffed Grandpa Trevor. "Who do those idiots think they're talking about?

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One day you'll be more famous than everyone else at this school put together! I can feel it in my bones."

Bruno felt a flush of guilt. There was nothing he wanted more than to make his grandpa proud. But the old man had such high hopes of him. How would Bruno ever live up to them? He wasn't the cleverest in his class, nor the sportiest, nor the most musical, nor even the best looking. Perhaps the photographers were right. Perhaps he was *nobody important*. That was what his classmates thought, after all.

His classmates. Bruno could see them all now, assembled on the gravel driveway with their enormous designer suitcases, their parents hovering over them like flies around manure. At the edge of the crowd lurked the boy Bruno disliked most of all. Humbert Maldewicks. A talented violinist who bore an uncanny resemblance to the young emperor Nero, Humbert had a love of all things classical and cruel. The gold ring that he wore on his little finger bore the Maldewicks family motto: *If in doubticus, fibicus*. Not a day passed in which Humbert was not faithful to these words.



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Bruno watched as Humbert disentangled himself from Mrs Maldewicks' embrace. It was hard not to laugh at the sight of Humbert's pale triangular face, pockmarked with his mother's lipstick like a bad case of acne. Humbert glanced up just in time to catch Bruno giggling. He scowled. Then a nasty smirk began to play about the corners of his lips. He brought two fingers together into the shape of a gun and pointed them at Chippy. *Boom!*



Humbert mimed blasting the parrot into the sky. "Emergency! Emergency!" declared Chippy, flapping her wings in fright.

"That's my boy!" roared Mr Maldewicks and slapped Humbert so hard on the back he almost knocked him over. "Keep up that kind of aim and I'll take you with me next time I go shooting lions in the Serengeti."

"Really?" gasped Humbert, who couldn't think of a more exciting way to spend his summer holidays. "That'd be awesome."

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"There you are, Bruno!" a voice called across the lawn.

Bruno turned to see Miss Goodwin heading towards them with a frazzled smile on her face and a clipboard in her hands. As teachers go, Bruno had to admit that Miss Goodwin was actually quite nice. In fact, she was one of the things that Bruno disliked *least* about St Ermingarda's. Most adults who spend their lives surrounded by spoilt children become as sour as shrivelled lemons. With Miss Goodwin, however, a deep well of natural kindness had helped her to remain as sweet as a peach. Even when she was trying to be stern, her blue eyes smiled softly under her long blonde fringe.

"Late again," she scolded merrily. "I shall have to put *you* in detention soon, Mr Pockley. It's your job to get your grandson here on time, you know."



"Who's a naughty boy?" squawked Chippy from beneath Grandpa Trevor's dislodged comb-over.

"Better late than never, eh?" The old man chuckled. "Anyway, a detention wouldn't be so bad if you were monitoring it, Miss Goodwin."

Bruno stared down at the ground in

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embarrassment. Perhaps, on second thoughts, he should have warned Grandpa Trevor that his hair had come unstuck. Now the teacher was looking at him as if he was some kind of lunatic.

"I'm afraid," she said with a bemused smile, "that the time has come to say your goodbyes. Here, let me take that suitcase for you, Bruno."

Trevor Pockley bent down to give his grandson a hug. Bruno breathed in the familiar scent of warm jumper encrusted with fried egg.

"Mind how you go, love," said Grandpa Trevor. "Don't be sailing into any hot water. I'll be worrying about you, y'know."

Miss Goodwin put a reassuring hand on the old man's arm. "There's absolutely no need to worry, Mr Pockley. Your grandson can't possibly get into any trouble while he's with me."

And of course the kind-hearted teacher believed every word she said.



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5
All Aboard the St Ermingarda's School Jet

For most people, a school trip means a few hours aboard a smelly old bus followed by an afternoon trooping around an ancient monument or museum, pausing every now and again to take a brass rubbing or to eat a sweaty packed lunch. Not so for the pupils of St Ermingarda's. For, as by now I am sure you've guessed, the pupils of St Ermingarda's were not most people. They were the sons and daughters of megastars and millionaires. They did not eat packed lunches or take brass rubbings and they most certainly did not travel by school bus. As far as they were concerned, there was only one way to travel – and that was by private jet. And not



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just any old private jet, either: a big shiny silver one emblazoned with the St Ermingarda's school crest.

The school grounds were easily big enough to accommodate a runway (between the many playing fields, heated swimming pools and tennis courts). Last year, before Bruno had joined the school, his class had flown all the way to Australia to learn to scuba-dive on the Great Barrier Reef. This year, as part of a project they'd been doing on the history of cinema, they were off to a film festival in the South of France.

"Blimey," Grandpa Trevor had said when he signed the permission form. "Best school trip I ever went on was to a hosepipe-manufacturing factory. Surprisingly interesting it was, too, watching how they got the holes in the rubber tubing. But a film festival – well, we didn't go on trips like that in my day. You make the most of this opportunity, my love."

"Yes, Grandpa," said Bruno, not wanting to sound ungrateful.

Just how ungrateful the average St Ermingarda's student was would have been obvious to anyone looking in on Bruno's classmates as they waited on the runway for take-off. Had you been there,

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for instance, stowed away beneath a seat, I'm sure you'd have been shocked to see the rows of children staring goggle-eyed at mobile phones and laptops. Only one girl was looking out of the window with excited anticipation of the journey ahead. This girl had bobbed brown hair, bright green eyes and a neat button nose. It was the first time she had ever been on an aeroplane. Her name was Grace Chalk and she was even newer to St Ermingarda's than Bruno. She had joined just a few weeks ago, at the start of the spring term.



On Grace's first day the headmistress had introduced her in assembly. "Please give a big round of applause to Grace Chalk, winner of our annual scholarship for exceptionally talented linguists."

Back at home, Bruno had looked up the word "linguist" in the dictionary. Perhaps this could be his special talent too. After all, if he didn't know what a word meant, how was he supposed to know if he was any good at it?

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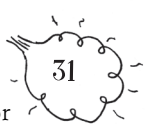
linguist/ *n*. someone with a gift for speaking foreign languages.

Bruno's heart sank. He was bottom of the class in French and German, and the only kind of Mandarin he would ever get his tongue around was the kind with pips and an orange skin. Here was yet another talent he did not possess.

The funny thing was that for someone who was supposed to be so good at speaking foreign languages, Grace did not seem very fond of talking. Bruno had hardly heard her utter a word since the day she'd arrived. She rarely spoke in class and she spent all her break times alone in the library. No doubt she thought she was far too clever to mix with anyone else.

The seat next to Grace was the last empty one on the plane. Bruno had no choice but to sit down beside her. Grace did not say hello. Instead she flashed him a brief half-smile before turning back towards the window. Oh well, thought Bruno, it's better than getting stuck next to Humbert for two hours.

"Sixty seconds till take-off," announced the pilot. "Please fasten your seatbelts and hand in all electronic devices."



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Loud sighs went round the plane, followed by a bleeping chorus of mobile phones and laptops being switched off. Miss Goodwin collected them all up in a basket, to be handed back at the end of the trip. The pilot revved up the engine. Bruno clung tight to his seat as the plane sped off down the tarmac then climbed steeply into the sky. He peered over Grace's shoulder to see the grey expanse of rooftops give way to emerald swatches of field. Then the plane was wrapped in a duvet of cloud. Bruno's heart pounded in his chest. *Boom, boom, boom,* it went, like a timpani drum.

Perhaps you are wondering if Bruno was scared. Let me assure you that this was not the case. As befits the hero of our story, Bruno was a brave boy, as unafraid of flying as he was of rollercoasters or spiders. The truth was that a tiny part of him hoped to glimpse his parents floating past the window.

"Stop the plane!" he would yell. "That's my mum and dad out there!"

A much larger part of Bruno knew that this was a ridiculous idea. His parents must have fallen to earth many months ago. By now their bodies would be lying in some distant desert or at the bottom of a lonely ocean. Tears welled in Bruno's



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eyes as he imagined their bones stripped clean of flesh by vultures or piranh—

Splat!

Just as Bruno's daydream was becoming too terrible to bear, he felt something cold and wet land on his neck. Then whatever it was began to ooze slowly down his shirt. Bruno reached under his collar then brought his fingers back out again. They were covered in a glistening black slime and there was a reek of fish in the air.

"Eewk!" he said, wiping his hands on his shorts. "What's *that*?" Grace turned from the window. Her hand fluttered up to her mouth like a startled bird.

"Oh no," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. It's all my fault."

"Why are *you* sorry?" asked a bewildered Bruno, still trying to wipe the disgusting black gunk off his fingers. "It wasn't you, was it?"

Grace looked hurt. "Of course not," she protested, glancing nervously over her shoulder. "It was Humbert. That black stuff's caviar. Otherwise known as stinky fish eggs. Humbert often has it in his lunch box. He's found out that I'm allergic to fish, and now he thinks it's funny to throw food at me. Tuna sandwiches, smoked

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salmon bagels, pickled herrings – you name it. This time he must have missed and got you instead."

Bruno peered down the plane. Two rows behind them, Humbert sat smirking like a shark. Sure enough, there in his hand was an open tin of caviar. Raising the tin in a mock "cheers", Humbert slurped up a spoonful of the fishy black slime. Bruno unbuckled his belt and knelt up in his seat.

"You're sick in the head, you know that, Humbert?" he shouted. "Only a total coward would pick on someone about their allergy. How would you like it if I put a wasp's nest in your locker? Or stuffed stinging nettles down your pants?"

The children seated around Humbert began to titter.

Hearing the commotion, Miss Goodwin came rushing down the plane.

"Bruno!" she cried. "Wearing a seatbelt is for your own protection. If you need the toilet, just press the button and I'll escort you up the aisle."

Bruno slid back down into his seat, cringing with embarrassment. "Sorry, miss," he said quickly. "I was just, erm, stretching, that's all."

Miss Goodwin shook her head and returned to



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the front of the plane. As soon as she was out of earshot, Bruno turned to Grace.

"You should've told her Humbert's picking on you," he said.

Grace folded her arms across her chest. "It'd just make things worse. Anyway, it's not like *you* told her Humbert was throwing stuff at you, is it?"

Before Bruno could think of a reply, there was an outbreak of singing from the back of the plane.

"Stink Bomb! Stink Bomb!
Bruno Stink Bomb!
He could take down Humbert
If he blasts him with his bum!"

Bruno didn't need to turn round to recognize the high-pitched wail of Xanadu Messiah Brown. Xanadu: the boy with a song for every occasion. Beneath his straw hat Xanadu wore a pair of silver reflective sunglasses that hovered above his nose like a pair of flying saucers coming in to land. The adopted son of a world-famous pop star and her backing-dancer husband, Xanadu loved to be the centre of attention. Everything about his appearance, from the tip of his bleached white

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Mohican to the ends of his polished blue nails, screamed, "Look at me!". At the age of seven Xanadu had been given his own TV show, *Xanadu's World*, in which he'd travelled the planet in search of new dance moves. Among his more famous discoveries were the Brazilian Crossed Banana Splits and the Sichuan Shimmyhip. Personally, Bruno thought both moves made Xanadu look like a donkey trying to hold in its pee. In recent years, the child star had disappeared from the nation's TV screens. Now he claimed to be on the brink of making a comeback.

Grace rolled her eyes as the singing got louder and louder. "Just ignore him," she said.

"Oh, I'm taking it as a compliment," said Bruno. "Musical parping is my special talent, you know."

Grace's eyes widened. Bruno kicked himself. He should have known a swotty girl like her would disapprove. But then suddenly two dimples, like bites in an apple, appeared in her cheeks.

"That's the coolest thing ever!" she exclaimed.

"Really?" asked Bruno. "You really think so?" Grace nodded. Bruno grinned from ear to sticky-out ear.

"Well, thanks. It's great to meet someone



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who gets how gifted I am." The singing had now reached a crescendo. Bruno twisted round in his seat and leant out into the aisle. "Hey, Xanadu!" he called. "I reckon that might be your first hit! Remind me again, how many people downloaded your last single?"

Xanadu's last single had sold only two copies, one to his mum and one to his grandma. He stopped singing as abruptly as if Bruno had pulled the plug out of the stereo.

Grace started to giggle. "You know, apart from Miss Goodwin, you're the first nice person I've met since coming to St Ermingarda's."

"Same here." Bruno smiled. "How about we stick together from now on?"

Grace grinned shyly back at him. "I'd like that."

By now the plane had begun its descent. The Mediterranean Sea stretched out below them like a shimmering blue cloth. Bruno felt his ears pop as the pilot turned sharply inland. He looked out of the window and saw that they were flying low over olive groves and vineyards. A minute or so later, the St Ermingarda's school jet touched down at an airfield just outside the glamorous seaside resort of Cannes. The sun was high in the sky,



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and stepping off the plane felt like stepping into a lovely warm bath. A fleet of limousines waited at the end of the runway, engines purring, ready to whisk the children away to their luxury hotel.

A few hours ago, Bruno had been determined to hate every second of the dreaded school trip. Now, with a new friend to share it with, he couldn't help but feel just a teeny-weeny bit excited.



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